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BHAIRAVA AS KṢĒTRAPĀLA IN SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLES FROM 10TH - 13TH CENTURY C.E.

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Abstract

Bhairava, an embodiment of Lord Śiva's fierce aspect, is understood as having the pivotal position of safeguarding sacred spaces. His role as a kṣētrapāla or a guardian deity, is found in temple complexes of Southern India built from the 10th to the 13th century C.E. The iconography of Bhairava, mentioned in the Purāṇas and Āgamas, adorn him with symbols denoting ferocity and divine authority, while also revealing his presence as a divine sentinel, poised to ward off malevolent forces. In this regard, rituals associated with Bhairava as Kṣētrapāla tend to form a vital component of temple practices, further delineating the intricate relationship between the divine Guardian and the sacred precincts. Employing a multidimensional approach, this research conducts an in-depth analysis of temple inscriptions and sculptural representations, while contextualising the findings within the relevant historical framework.

Keywords: Bhairava, Kṣētrapāla, Saivism, Iconography, Medieval Temples

Introduction

The Hindu deity Śiva embodies ambivalence, oscillating between benevolence and formidable power, particularly in his destructive aspect, where he manifests in various terrifying forms. Notably, Bhairava (literally meaning terrifying), one of Śiva's most violent depictions closely tied to the decapitation of Brahmā's fifth head, holds significance in Indian theological and sculptural productions. Having the most significant iconographic variations, Bhairava can act as a focal point for exploring the numerous artistic renderings within the realm of Śiva's appearances. Amidst the plethora of names and epithets ascribed to this divine entity in religious literature, 'Kṣētrapāla' or the 'Guardian of the Territory' emerges as notably prevalent.

The term 'kṣetra' encompasses a spectrum of meanings, signifying any field, ground, terrain, or place, while according to Āgamic texts, Bhairava or Kṣētrapāla can also be equally placed in a variety of geographical locations for the safeguarding of people and personal wealth. The cult of Bhairava witnessed a notable surge in Southern India between the 10th and 13th centuries, and it was during this epoch that a substantial number of sculpted representations of the deity, preserved to the present day, were crafted. Notably, in their zeal for temple construction, the Cōḷa and Hoysaḷa dynasties played a pivotal role in filling their domains with these artistic depictions. The guidelines governing the depictions of Kṣētrapāla, as outlined in various *Purāṇic* and *Āgamic* texts, exhibit minimal variance compared to descriptions of Bhairava from those

same texts. The only factor used to understand when Bhairava plays the role of Kṣētrapāla is the positioning of the image within a temple complex. Scholars such as Adiceam (1965)¹, Ramamurthy (1984)², and Nagaswamy (2003)³ have also previously suggested Bhairava's role as a guardian of sacred structures. This research contributes to this discourse by trying to identify those temples built from the 10th-13th C.E. where Bhairava specifically appears in the capacity of a temple guardian.

Agrarian Origins of a Guardian Entity

The period spanning approximately from 1500 BCE to 800 BCE in the Indian subcontinent is commonly referred to as the Vedic Age. This terminology arises from the reliance on the Vedas, which are vital texts providing insights into the life and culture of the populace during this era. The establishment of permanent settlements, facilitated by a well-organised agricultural system in this period, is discerned through a synthesis of archaeological discoveries and literary sources, revealing a developmental landscape in the Gangetic Plain⁴. Surviving texts from this time show that the prevalent religious practices centred mainly around the worship of nature, and with the increasing significance of agricultural productivity and the associated land, there might have arisen a necessity to designate a deity to protect these vital areas. Intriguingly, the Vedic deity Rudra, who later evolved into the prominent figure of Śiva, was given this duty, having held the epithet Kṣhētrapati in Vedic texts, signifying him as the Lord of the fields. In the *Ṛg-veda*, Kṣhētrapati is invoked for blessings related to cattle, horses, and overall prosperity, while the *Atharvaveda* contains hymns resonating with the themes of fields, plants, and ploughing, explicitly addressing the deity as the Lord of the field⁵.

Another ancient tutelary figure in Vedic literature who may have lent some of his features to the future Kṣētrapāla was Vāstospati, the “master of the site, of the dwelling”. More or less assimilated with Rudra, according to sources, he is sometimes associated or identified with a dog, which later became the mount of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla⁶. As time progressed, the elemental Vedic deities associated with natural forces underwent integration into the broader tradition of the Brahminical pantheon, a phenomenon evident in *Purāṇic* texts. In this manner, numerous minor entities, originally delineated during Vedic times became assimilated into the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, or Śiva.

Purāṇic Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla

The *Purāṇas*, often referred to as ‘stories of the past,’ serve as indispensable sources for understanding the history of Hinduism. Challenging to date precisely, these texts likely draw from ancient sources, quoting and borrowing from each other, with additions made at various points in time⁷. Among the great deeds of Śiva mentioned in these *Purāṇas*, the earliest references to Bhairava as a deity or as a form of Śiva can be traced. Notably, the decapitation of Brahmā's fifth head is attributed to Bhairava in early *Purāṇic* sources such as the *Kūrmapurāṇa* (2.31), *Śivapurāṇa* (*Śatarudrasamhita*, VIII and IX), *Skandapurāṇa* (*Brāhmakhandā*, 1.31), and others⁸.

These narratives converge in presenting parallel details: In response to the sages' inquiry about the immutable principle, Brahmā, influenced by Śiva's illusion (*mayā*), declared himself as the origin of the universe. Subsequently, Viṣṇu asserted his role as the Creator. The four Vedas and the sacred syllable 'om' instead, proclaimed the supremacy of Śiva. Despite this, Brahmā persisted in claiming the title of Supreme Lord. In response, an extraordinary light emerged, revealing Śiva. Still asserting his supremacy, Brahmā addressed Śiva, claiming that he was born from his forehead. Śiva, in response, charged Bhairava to punish Brahmā for his arrogance, and Bhairava severed the fifth head of Brahmā, making him finally acknowledge the superiority of Śiva. Bhairava was then instructed to carry the severed head and beg, revealing to the world an expiatory rite for liberation. After describing this incident, the *Śivapurāṇa* (2.8.2) goes as far as to call Bhairava the complete form or *pūrṇa-rūpa* of Śiva⁹. Therefore, it is evident that from the earliest depictions of Bhairava, a Saivite inclination has consistently accompanied him, remaining an integral aspect in numerous other accounts of his manifestations.

The term *Kṣētrapāla* appears in the plural form in the *Agnipurāṇa* (CI.17) and *Matsyapurāṇa* (CCXVI.51-52), grouping these entities without clear definition and assimilating them to a lower class of beings alongside *piśācas*, *vetālas*, and *pretas*. The sole descriptor provided for these *Kṣētrapāla* entities is that they are simple two-armed entities with their possessions being either a *śūla* (trident), spear and a *kapāla* (bowl/skull-bowl), possibly indicating that they carry weapons like any other minor guardian deities or that it signals their affiliation with the Saiva pantheon. Interestingly, certain *Purāṇas*, such as the *Līṅgapurāṇa* (I, CVI) and the *Skandapurāṇa* (*Māheśvarakhanda*, LXII), recount a tale wherein Śiva assumed the form of a child to absorb Goddess Kālī's anger, which had alarmed the gods. In both versions, the child later transforms into eight or sixty-four physical forms, respectively, to safeguard sacred places. Śiva then designates a dog as their mount and decrees that individuals should worship them before undertaking any actions. Both these references can be understood as the only accounts in the *Purāṇas* citing an origin to *Kṣētrapāla* and the responsibility of guardianship given to this entity and the child-like appearance delineated as his nature is similar to the attributes provided in the *Āgamic* texts and other *Dhyānaśloka* mantras (meditation stanzas) to propitiate and describe him. His multiple forms, numbering eight or sixty-four, symbolise comprehensive coverage over physical and metaphysical cardinal points and indicate that it extends his protection to the whole world. Interestingly, it is again in the *Skandapurāṇa* (V. 1.70.48-49) that we see the term *Kṣētrapāla* employed in the singular. In this narrative, the eighth and final Bhairava existing in *Avantī* is bestowed with the name *Kṣētrapāla* without going into any iconographic details, and this seems to be the only *Purāṇic* account that combines these deities into a singular grouping.

Āgamic Undertakings of Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla

The *Āgamas*, predominantly composed in Sanskrit, constitute a distinctive category of literature primarily focused on rituals and spiritual practices¹⁰. In contrast to the *Purāṇas*, often perceived as compilations with numerous additions, the *Āgamas* occasionally attribute authorship to specific individuals, although determining the precise date and geographic origin of these texts can be challenging. In *Āgamic* texts such as Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* and

Tirumūlar's *Tirumantiram*, spanning from the northern and southern regions of the present Indian border, Bhairava consistently holds the position of the supreme deity in the Saiva pantheon and simultaneously, *Kṣētrapāla* is accorded the status of an independent deity, substantiated by the presence of one or more chapters dedicated to him in texts like the *Brahmāyāmala*, *Ajitāgama*, *Suprabhedāgama*, and others.

As demonstrated by Ladrech, it is within the Āgamic literature that the terms *Bhairava* and *Kṣētrapāla* become entirely synonymous. In the text titled, *Bhairavastotra*, *Kṣētrapāla* is listed as one of the hundred and eight names of Bhairava (Verse 5b), while in the *Kālabhairavastotra*, Bhairava is specifically addressed as *Kṣētrapāla* (Verse 6b). Reciprocally, *Kṣētrapāla* is referred to as Bhairava in the *Devatādhyānaśloka* (T 252, p. 586), *Dhyānagrantha* (T 187, p. 41-42), and *Dhyānaratnavali* (T 232, p. 183), while the *Daksinakuṭīdvīpakṣetramāhātmya* designates Bhairava as the 'protector of the territory' *Kṣētrapāla*, from whom the eight Bhairavas originate (37.30), and includes *Kṣētrapāla* among the various forms of Bhairava (37.32-33)¹¹.

Kṣētrapāla is also distinctly associated with *Vaṭukabhairava* in specific Āgamic texts, where the term '*Vaṭuka*' signifies a young boy or dwarf. Notably, in the *Dhyānaślokasamgrahādi* and the *Isānaśivagurudevapaddhati*, the young boy or *Vaṭuka* is venerated as the master of *bhūtas* and *piśācas*, assuming the role of the Guardian/Master of the territory¹². *Kṣētrapāla*'s child-like form is further emphasised in the *Mayamata* (36.183), and the *Pūrvakāranāgama* (103.45) describes him as having a countenance 'that soothes the goddess', possibly alluding to the narrative of Śiva as a child absorbing the anger of Kālī/ Kālīka as mentioned earlier. These meticulous uses of similar nomenclature for both deities being encompassed within their numerous names and epithets is discernible even in texts instructing the crafting and consecrating of their icons within temple complexes.

Similarities of Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla as seen in Iconographic and Temple Treatises

Chapter 70 of the *Uttarakaranāgama* is dedicated to the 'installation of *Bhairava-Kṣētrapāla*', and the text titled, *Prayogasāra* emphasises that any ritual conducted without first venerating *Kṣētrapāla* fails to attain the desired ceremonial outcomes. Moreover, the *Ākāśabhairavakalpa*, in its thirty-sixth chapter, addressing the *Kṣētrapāla* cult, indicates that he assumes the name Mahābhairava during the *Śrībali* offering, implying that a ritualistic connection between *Kṣētrapāla* and Bhairava was also established in a ceremonial context¹³.

According to iconographic texts, both Bhairava and *Kṣētrapāla* exhibit variations in the number of arms, ranging from two to nearly eighteen, each wielding different weapons of war. Their descriptions share similarities, depicting them as formidable figures with curved fangs (*Uttarakamikāgama*, 70.1-2), appearing either unclothed (*Śāradātilakatantra*, 20.34) or adorned in animal skin (*Śrītatvanidhi*, 3.53). Frequently, they are portrayed with curly hair, although many texts suggest an iconic feature of erect flaming hair or *Agni-Kesha* (*Purnakarāgama*, 8.97-101, *Jayadrathayāmala*, 12-17, etc.). Ornaments can vary, including bells (*Ajitāgama*, 36.314-318), snakes (*Skandapurāṇa*, 19.3-6), or a combination

of both (*Pūrvakāraṇāgama*, 53.47). Some texts even propose a 'garland of heads' or *Muṇḍamāla* as an embellishment for these deities (MD, 111 and ĀGP, 2.7). Additionally, a common attribute is the presence of a dog as a mount (*Mayamata*, XXXVI, 178-185, and *Sārasvatīyacitrakarmasāstra*, XXXV, 1-38)¹⁴. Notably, the *Śivapurāṇa* (2.31.146-150), the *Agnipurāṇa* (52.9-13), and the *Līṅgapurāṇa* (Vol I.76.27-29) state that Bhairava is adorned with a crescent moon in his head but this particular detail is absent in the Āgamic iconographic representations of Kṣētrapāla. It is, however, important to note that this distinctive feature alone cannot be solely relied upon to distinguish between an icon of Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla, as explored further in the subsequent sections of the paper.

An Iconographic survey of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla Icon in Southern India

Ladrech, in her work titled, '*Le crâne et le glaive Représentations de Bhairava en Inde du Sud (VIII-XIII siècles)*,' conducted an extensive survey of Bhairava images in the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu from the 10th to the 13th Century C.E. During this investigation, she identified that the most frequently depicted images of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla were four-handed, and the implements in their hands, especially those belonging to the Cōḷa school of art, consisted of the *pāśa* (noose/lasso) and *kapāla* (skull bowl) in the upper and lower left hands, and the *damaru* (kettle-drum) and *triśūla* (trident) held in the upper and lower right hands, respectively (Figure 1). Several texts provide these attributes to Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla without specifying their position in the hands of the god. Examples include the Bhairava of *Dhyanaratnavali* and *Skandapurāṇa*, the *Vaṭukabhairava* of *Śrītatvanidhi*, the Bhairava-Kṣētrapāla of *Uttarakāraṇāgama*, the Kṣētrapāla of *Devatādhyānaśloka*, *Dhyānaśloka* and *Dhyanaratnāvali*. Among those that specify the hands in which these attributes are found, descriptions of the *Svarṇakālabhairava* in the *Cidambareśvaraśrīṇaṭarāja - devālayasthadevatāstotra*, the Kṣētrapāla/Vaṭuka in *Isānaśivagurudevapaddhati*, the Kṣētrapāla in the *Ajitāgama*, and the *Pūrvakāraṇāgama* all prescribe this combination of attributes¹⁵. Hence, this visual examination underscores the limitation of relying solely on iconographic depictions outlined in religious texts to distinguish between Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla.



Figure 1: A four handed image of Bhairava / Kṣētrapāla from the Cōḷa Period currently housed in the Government Museum, Trichy

Using Āgamic instructions and temple inscriptions to identify Kṣētrapāla

As per the *Sārasvatīyacitrakarmasāstra* (XXXII.3-4), Kṣētrapāla is positioned outside or at the centre of inhabited areas like villages, forests, mountains, riverbanks, ponds, or possibly the ocean, aiming to safeguard the people. Additionally, the text (XXXII.5-7) notes that the shrine for Kṣētrapāla may also reside on the temple grounds of Śiva as part of the god's retinue,

with the icon typically placed in the northeast sector of the temple. This location for Kṣētrapāla is reiterated in the *Ajitāgama* (*Kriyāpāda*, XXXIX.34), the *Karanāgama* (1.60.33-35), and the *Rauravāgama* (*Kriyāpāda*, LI.13). Ramamurthy¹⁶, conducted an exhaustive study, uncovering twenty-one inscriptions from the Cōḷa dynasty and four from the Pandyan dynasty, dating between the 10th and 13th centuries C.E, discovered in various temples across present-day Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, referring to the presence or donation of a Kṣētrapāla image for worship (Table 1).

S.No	Name of the Ruler Under Whose Reign the Inscription is Found	Dynasty	No. of Inscriptions
1	Rajaraja I	Cōḷa	5
2	Rajendra I	Cōḷa	3
3	Virarajendra	Cōḷa	3
4	Kulottunga I	Cōḷa	1
5	Kulottunga II	Cōḷa	1
6	Kulottunga III	Cōḷa	5
7	Jatavarman Kulasēkhara	Pandya	2
8	Rajaraja III	Cōḷa	3
9	Virasola Pandya	Pandya	2

Table 1: The list of Inscriptions mentioning Kṣētrapāla as identified by Ramamurthy (1984)

The earliest among them is associated with the reign of Cōḷa king Rajaraja I (SII, Vol. II, Part 2, no. 43, pp. 172-74), with the last Cōḷa period inscription mentioning *Kṣētrapāla* dated to the reign of Rajaraja III (ARE, no. 407, year 1909, and ARE., no. 216, year 1910). The Pandyan dynasty inscriptions under the rule of Jatavarman Kulasekhara (ARE, no. 519, year 1911, and SII, Vol. XXIII, no. 99) appear to be the earliest, while those under Jatavarman alias Udaiyar Virasola Pandya (ARE, no. 99, year 1924; SII, Vol. XIV, no. 171) seem to be the latest. All these inscriptions appear to showcase the presence of a deity called Kṣētrapāla in a temple context spanning from 987 C.E. to 1274 C.E.

A significant revelation from these inscriptions is the absence of any mentions of Kṣētrapāla before the reign of Rajaraja I, and it was only during his era that inscriptions first surfaced, indicating his contributions of donating images of Kṣētrapāla in both stone and precious metals for consecration. This practice continued under the patronage of his son, Rajendra I, and grandson, Virarajendra Cōḷa, who furthered the construction of Kṣētrapāla shrines in various temples. Subsequent inscriptions, post the reigns of these three rulers, document gifts and wealth donated to the worship of Kṣētrapāla, primarily by individuals of non-royal lineage and subordinate rulers under the Cōḷa and Pandya regimes. This trend suggests a notable shift in the sponsorship and propagation of Kṣētrapāla worship from the royal to non-royal domains.

Two temples in Tamil Nadu with inscriptions mentioning Kṣētrapāla have images of the Cōḷa period that can be identified as Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla in accordance with their appearance and the icons held in their hands. One is from the Kapardīśvara Temple in Tiruvalaṇjuli, and the other is from the Vamanapurīśvara temple in Tirumanikuli.

The Kapardīśvara Temple boasts a distinctive shrine dedicated to Kṣētrapāla, corroborated by inscriptions from the era of Rajaraja I, explicitly labelling it as the abode of 'Kṣētrapāla Pillaiyar' (SII, Vol. VIII, no. 234). The term 'Pillaiyar,' akin to Lord Gaṇeśa's appellation in Tamil Nadu, suggests a relational aspect, possibly portraying Kṣētrapāla as a divine son—an echo of his origin in the *Skandapurāṇa* and *Līṅgapurāṇa*. The inscriptions detail grants of gold and jewels by the royal family, endowing the shrine for worship. An intricately carved sculpture discovered in this shrine, now housed in the Thanjavur Art Gallery, stands 152cms. in length and features eight arms (Figure 2). Two of these arms are broken, while the remaining carry attributes like arrow, *paśa*, sword, and a trident (broken) in the right hands, and bow, *damaru*, bell, and a broken attribute, likely a *kapāla* in the left hands.

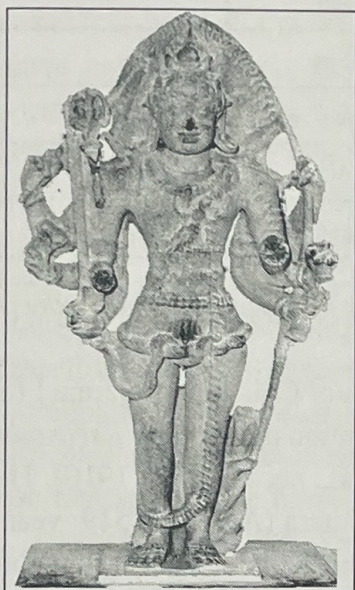


Figure 2: Eight Armed Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Kapardīśvara Temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)



Figure 3: Four armed Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Vamanapurīśvara temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)

Ladrech notes that this combination of attributes aligns with descriptions for Bhairava in the *Devatādhyānaśloka* and *Dhyana-Sloka* and for Kṣētrapāla in the *Dhyānaratnāvali*. However, the placement of specific attributes on the sculpture differs from these descriptions. The *Ajitāgama* provides a similar combination for Kṣētrapāla, again with variations. This discrepancy underscores the critical importance of inscriptions for accurate identification, emphasising that relying solely on textual references can lead to misinterpretations. The Vamanapurīśvara temple holds an inscription dating back to the rule of Kulottunga III, detailing endowments for the continuous illumination of lamps dedicated to Kṣētrapāla, and within this temple resides a Cōḷa-period four-handed image of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla (Figure 3).

This sculpture features attributes consistent with the prevalent characteristics observed in Cōḷa-period four-handed icons, as identified by Ladrech and outlined earlier. These two icons, despite being crafted centuries apart, share remarkable similarities. A distinctive feature common to both is the garland of bells gracefully draping from the left shoulder to the right ankle. Additionally, the *Agni-Kesha*, resembling a radiant halo, adorns both deities. Although Nagaswamy¹⁷, during the initial identification of the Kapardīśvara Temple image, did not explicitly mention a dog, Ladrech, in her subsequent analysis, tentatively identifies a small animal, possibly a dog, sculpted at the deity's feet. Interestingly, in the Vamanapurīśvara temple's image, a dog is depicted as the god's mount, positioned upright behind the deity and adorned with bell-like ornaments mirroring its master. The agricultural origins of using canine creatures to safeguard wealth and property likely played a pivotal role in designating the dog as the mount of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla, reinforcing the deity's role as a sentinel within ritual spaces.

Possible Identifications of Kṣētrapāla Images

Considering that Cōḷa-era inscriptions consistently refer to Bhairava as Kṣētrapāla and analysing the iconography of images found in temples such as Kapardīśvara and Vamanapurīśvara, it becomes apparent that numerous other depictions of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla can be identified within structures commissioned by Cōḷa rulers. Even in cases where specific inscriptions do not mention Kṣētrapāla, the visual elements of the sculptures align with the characteristics associated with this divine figure. An eight-armed depiction of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla dating back to the era of Rajaraja I, situated at the entrance of the Brhadīśvara Temple in Thanjavur, facing the *Mukhamandapa*, shares remarkable similarities with the image discovered at the Kapardīśvara Temple. Both sculptures feature a distinct garland of bells and lack representations of their canine mounts while also holding similar attributes, albeit in a different sequence. However, a notable point of divergence lies in the presence of a garland of heads, observed in the former but absent in the latter (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Eight Armed Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla Image from the Brhadīśvara Temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)



Figure 5: Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Ādipurīśvara Temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)

Another four-handed Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla image from Tiruvorriyūr holds a position in the northeast section of the main sanctuary within the Ādipurīśvara Temple (Figure 5). Murthy¹⁸ suggests that this image's earrings or *rudraksa kundalas* exhibit influences from northern Saivism. This assertion aligns with the presence of the Pasupata sect within the temple precincts, as indicated by inscriptions discovered at the site. Notably, the mace held in the lower left hand corresponds to how *dwarapālakas* or door guardians wield their weapons, once again emphasising the deity's protective facet.

An inscription originating from the era of Rajendra I, discovered at the Kolāramma Temple in Kolār, Karnataka (Epigraphia Carnatica (E.C.), Vol. X, Kl. 108, pp. 35-39.), references to the deity Kṣētrapāla. Intriguingly, a present-day four-armed image of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla is housed within the temple, and notably, this representation is seated—an aspect rarely observed in the images from Tamil Nadu. Additionally, the festoon design adorning the *Mukuta* (crown) exhibits similarities to the imagery prevalent during the Hoysaḷa period (Figure 6). The Valarmadiśvara temple in Nirpālani (Dt. Pudukkottai) houses an inscription from the era of Kulottunga III, documenting the consecration of the image of Kṣētrapāla (IPS, Part II, no. 154). Presently, within the temple complex, a four-armed, albeit broken, image of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla is found, and this sculpture exhibits the distinctive garland of bells characteristic of Cōḷa-period depictions of the deity (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Kolāramma Temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)



Figure 7: Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Valarmadiśvara temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)

Instances of Bhairava's assertions of supremacy

The aforementioned discoveries align with Balasubrahmanyam's propositions that in Cōḷa temples dedicated to Śiva in Tamil Nadu, Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla frequently constituted one of the eight assessors or *parivāradevatās* of Śiva with each deity within this group having a dedicated sanctuary within the confines of the main temple¹⁹. However, there are instances where the placement of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla prompts questions about whether his role was solely that of a protector of sacred grounds. For example, even in the Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, the

deity is installed in the main sanctuary, a position of great prominence within a temple considered one of the most revered in India. Examining the State of Karnataka during the Hoysaḷa rule, we observe that a separate shrine was constructed for the god (Figure 8) to the northeast of one of the earliest Hoysaḷa temples, Lakṣmīdevī at Doddagaddavalli. This location, indicative of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla's guardian function on the site, becomes complicated when he becomes adorned with door guardian figures depicted in the act of committing suicide (Figure 9). This suggests that Bhairava was venerated in these places not only as a temple guardian but as a supreme deity beyond that role.



Figure 8: Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla from the Lakṣmīdevī Temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)



Figure 9: Guardian Figure Committing Suicide (PC: Karine Ladrech)

In the temple of Bhairava from Sitibeta, the historical evidence of Cōḷa and Hoysaḷa period inscriptions from the site belonging from the 13th century attests to the deity being known as '*Tribhuvanavidanga Kṣētrapāla Pillaiyār*' (*Epigraphia Carnatica* (E.C.), Vol X, KI. 43. p. 10). However, a 14th -century inscription notes donations by military personnel to the deity, seeking his favour for the king's victory in combat. This role aligns with depictions of Bhairava in warlike poses on the walls of Hoysaḷa temples in Karnataka. In Andhra Pradesh, the site of Hemāvātī (Anantapur district) is home to the Siddheśvara temple, where a four-armed seated image of Bhairava from the Nōḷamba period is situated (Figure 10). Locally referred to as *Heñjerappa* or the 'Father of *Heñjeru*,' the capital of the Nōḷambas, this image, according to Cohen²⁰, indicates that this dynasty who ruled parts of southern India even before the Cōḷa and Hoysaḷa dynasties possibly regarded Bhairava as both the Supreme Divinity and Guardian, under whose protection the capital city was under.



Figure 10: Bhairava or Heñjerappa from the Siddheśvara temple (PC: Karine Ladrech)

Conclusion

The dual conceptualisations of Bhairava, both as the supreme divinity and as an auxiliary deity, coexisted in Southern India from the 10th to 13th century and varied depending on the ruling dynasty's cosmogenic hierarchical preferences within the Saivite pantheon, underscoring the fundamental ambivalence surrounding this divine figure. While certain textual sources identify Bhairava as the 'full form' of Śiva, others present him as a partial emanation, with the term Kṣētrapāla evolving into a proper noun, denoting a distinct form of Śiva at some unspecified point. Even the *Tirumantiram* suggests that the Lord begged in Brahmā's skull to perpetuate and assume the role of the Guardian of *Dharma*, which can signify moral and religious order. Thus, the guardian function embodied by Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla remained embedded in the people's collective memory during this era.

As established in the preceding sections of this paper, from a purely iconographic perspective, it becomes challenging to determine whether the majority of representations depict the deity in the role of a guardian of the territory. This complexity arises because the most common adornments for the god in southern sculpture, such as snakes, skulls, and bells, are prescribed for both Bhairava and Kṣētrapāla in the texts, as are features like nudity and bristling hair imitating flames.

The presence of Bhairava/Kṣētrapāla inside South Indian temples indicates that he frequently assumed the role of Guardian and protector of Śiva's domain, encompassing both the physical and metaphysical realms. The prevalence of this deity in Tamil Nadu during the period of the 10th to 13th century, especially in secondary shrines within the precincts of main temples, as opposed to independent temples, suggests a more common association with the role of an assessor rather than a standalone principal deity.

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